

LEGISLATORS, IMPOSTORS AND THE POLITIC ORIGINS OF RELIGION

ENGLISH THEORIES OF 'IMPOSTURE' FROM STUBBE TO TOLAND

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I

On the 10th of June 1672 one John Baptista Damascene 'an impious and profane and irreligious person' of the extra-mural London parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields was arraigned for proclaiming 'impious, blasphemous and heretical words'. Some six months later Damascene was acquitted 'Not Guilty' of the charged utterance. He had been accused of proclaiming that 'Jesus Christ, Moyses and Mahomet were three greate rogues'¹. The central theme of the supposed impiety, that Moses, Christ and Mahomet were devious impostors, was to form the basis of one of the most radical eighteenth century attacks upon organised religion and the priesthood, the French work *Le Traité des Trois Imposteurs*, published in 1719 but in circulation on the Continent in the 1690s and 1700s. What then was John Baptista Damascene doing voicing such opinions in the suburbs of London in the early 1670s?

In late April 1656 Henry Oldenburg wrote in devoutly worried tones to the Dutch Collegiant Adam Boreel about an heretical work that argued that the three great religious legislators - Moses, Christ and Mohammed - were impostors who composed their religious economies 'from motives of merely political prudence'. For both sender, and presumably recipient, the 'first pillar of all true religion, was the existence of God and his providence as found in the 'certainty of Divine Revelation'. The author of the irreligious text, smitten with his 'love of reasoning', threatened all religion by undermining the, certainty, and 'divinity' of Scripture. As Popkin has shown, Oldenburg was attempting to cajole and encourage Boreel in his project of answering such charges of imposture. Writing to Boreel some four years later in August 1660 Oldenburg repeated insistently that the three most important doctrines to defend were the existence of the Deity, providence, and the divine origin of revelation. Oldenburg wrote also to the English divine John Beale in September of the same year, stressing that the

¹ J.C. Jeaffreson (ed) *Middlesex Sessions Rolls 1667-1668* 4 volumes (1886-1892) III 29.

central theme of their apologetics should be to 'give a full proof of the divine origin and veracity of ye Holy Scripture [...] with such evidence as we may prove ye truth of ye most received civil history in the world'. Defending the 'truth' of Scripture was the shibboleth of Oldenburg's, Boreel's, and as we will see later, Beale's conception of a counter-attack against the 'libertins' and 'indifferent men'.²

Over a decade earlier Thomas Browne in his *Religio Medici* (1643) had made reference to 'that villain and Secretary of Hell, that composed that miscreant piece of the Three Impostors'. Browne's opinion was that the author 'though divided from religion ... was not a positive Atheist'. Indeed, continued Browne, 'I confess I have perused them all, and can discern nothing that may startle a discreet belief: yet there are heads carried off with the wind and breath of such motives'. While Browne was secure with his 'discreet belief', others feared that less discreet heads might be startled out of their religion. Richard Smith, bibliophile and Comptor of the Poultry, claimed to have seen a similar text, presumably sometime before 1670. Like Browne (but in more detail), Smith was discreet enough to give some objective account of the treatise in his 'Observations on the Report of a Blasphemous Treatise by some affirmed to have been of late years published in print of Three Grand Impostors'. There are at least two surviving manuscript copies of Smith's 'Observations', both in the British Library.³ The first is bound in Smith's manuscript volume 'Wonders of the World'. The second is a separately paginated manuscript of twelve pages in a different hand. Although each text has a different order and some minor textual variations, they share a common source. Smith suggested that the existence of the treatise was 'a common rumour ... divulged not only by the vulgar illiterate sort, but by very many judicious men'. He seems to have been convinced that a Latin text existed. Upon the authority of Matthew Paris, Smith argued that the work was written by Simon Tornaiensis, a scholar learned in 'all ye liberal arts', and probably communicated to the Emperor Frederick II in the early thirteenth century. Certainly, in Smith's opinion, if there was a modern text the supposed authors were not original 'but only the divulggers there of which was long tyme before acted'. It seems probable that this work, is

² Henry Oldenburg to Adam Boreel April 1656 *The Correspondence of Henry Oldenburg* (ed) A.R. Hall and M.B. Hall (Madison, 1965) I 90-92; Oldenburg to Boreel August 1660 I 382; Oldenburg to John Beale September 1660 I 385-386.

³ Browne *Religio Medici and other works* (ed) L.C. Martin (Oxford, 1964) 21,26; R. Smith 'The Wonders of the World' British Library Sloane 388, 'Observations on the Report of a Blasphemous Treatise by some affirmed to have been of late years published in print of three great Impostors', at folios 358-361, also Sloane 1024. I have compared both mss.

it existed and if Smith had seen it, was the Latin one *De Tribus Impostoribus* published at Wittemburg in 1640.⁴

In England, then, between the early 1640s and the late 1660s there was a persistent literary rumour, perhaps a 'fama mendax', that a treatise, possibly modern but more likely a medieval Latin work, was in circulation among the cabals of unbelief and libertinism. The political context of the English Revolution provided ample room for the most radical critiques of established religion. Independents overthrew episcopacy, but men like the 'true leveller' Gerard Winstanley and the Quaker Samuel Fisher re-interpreted and rescinded traditional ideas of revelation. The attack on priestcraft went hand in hand with assaults on the divinity of the Bible. There is however a *lacunae* in current accounts of the origins of theories of imposture in the period. For the next cluster of references to treatises on imposture we have to move on a few decades and turn to France. We know the *Traité de Trois Imposteurs* was published in 1719: originating most likely from a *fin de siècle* Anglo-Dutch milieu.⁵ The published *Traité* as scholars have recently and expertly shown, was a collage of *libertin erudit*, Hobbist, Spinozist and classical sources. The studies of the reception and diffusion of the work have concentrated almost exclusively on the French context to the cost of any English dimension.⁶ Given the discussions of a similar work in England between the 1640s and 1660s this omission seems odd. It is the intention of this paper to examine both the Latin and French treatises and to see whether any influences can be found of either in the covert and published writings of English Freethought between 1670 and 1719.⁷

⁴ See J.A.I. Champion and R.H.Popkin 'Richard Smith's 'Observations' and the English origins of the treatises on imposture' (Forthcoming).

⁵ See S. Berti 'Jan Vroesen, autore del <<Traite des Trois Imposteurs>>' in *Rivista Storica Italiana* CIII (1991) especially footnotes 4-6 for a complete bibliography of the more recent studies.

⁶ See C.Hill *The World Turned Upside Down* (1978); I.O.Wade *The Clandestine Organisation and Diffusion of Philosophic Ideas in France* (Princeton, 1938) P.Hazard *La crise de la conscience européenne 1680-1715* (Paris, 1935);

M.C.Jacob *The Radical Enlightenment* (1981); C.J.Betts *Early Deism in France* (The Hague, 1984); J.S.Spink *French Freethought from Gassendi to Voltaire* (1960); B.E.Schwarzbach, A.W.Fairbairn 'Sur les rapports entre les éditions du 'Traité des trois imposteurs' et la tradition manuscrite de cet ouvrage' *Nouvelles de la république des lettres* 2 (1988); R.H. Popkin *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676)* (Leiden, 1987); R.H.Popkin 'The dispersion of Bodin's Dialogues in England, Holland, and Germany' *JHI* 49 (1988); S.Berti 'La vie et l'esprit de Spinoza' (1719) e la prima traduzione Francese dell'*Ethica*' in *Rivista Storica Italiana* XCVII (1986). See also R.H.Popkin 'The crisis of polytheism and the answers' and 'Polytheism, Deism, and Newton' in J.H.Force, R.H.Popkin (eds) *Essays on the Context. Nature. and the Influence of Isaac Newton's Theology* (The Hague, 1990).

⁷ For ease of reference I have used A.Nasier *The Three Impostors Translated* (1904) which contains English translations of both the French and the Latin treatises. All references are to this edition unless otherwise stated. *TTI* is the abbreviation for the *Traité des trois imposteurs* and *DTI* for the *De Tribus Impostoribus*. A comparison has been made of these texts with the two English manuscript translations, the first British Library Stowe 47 'The Famous Book Intitled De Tribus Impostoribus',

It is apparent that both works share common themes: an epistemological scepticism about the truth of revelation and an historical scepticism about the origins of religion. Nevertheless I will argue that there is a theoretical shift from the Latin to the French versions. In the Latin text the question posed is 'Can we know there is a right religion?', in the French the question has become a sociological or anthropological assertion, 'all religion is of human construction'. Here I think we stand between two historiographical positions: that of the Hazardian crisis of conscience and the idea of the evolution of a non-eschatological conception of history. Both treatises on imposture gesture toward these interpretations. It is my task to see how the English context contributed to these traditions. Let me turn to the texts in question.

As I have already briefly stated above, I intend argue that the Latin and French texts are parts of two distinct but conspiring traditions: the sceptical and the historical. Both are concerned with propositions, evidences and testimonies. Like Hobbist theme of *Leviathan* (1651) 'who shall judge', *De Tribus* is premised on the relativistic issue of how do we know which Scripture is right? The text poses the principle concern - how should God be worshipped (if at all)?, and how should we know which of the three religions is the correct way of worshipping. Since all revelations are texts with a history they must be treated as historical documents and subjected to the same critical examination as other secular documents. In this way the 'testimony' for Mahomet is just as good, if not better, than that for Moses. Working from this sceptical basis the next assertion concerns the social or political mechanics of imposture. Priests and Sovereigns were responsible for cultivating religious superstructures on the foundations of human ignorance and fear. Indeed the treatise is explicit about the complicity between *sacerdos* and *imperium*.⁸

While *De Tribus Impostoribus* is more theoretical than historical, the text uses the historical case of Islam to illustrate its relativism. Having discussed the possibility of Muslim prophecy, the author declared, 'and if we are too severely critical of the words of the Koran, we ought to employ the same severity of criticism against the writings of Moses and others'.⁹ True

and the second at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Bamberger #669 'De Tribus Impostoribus, or a Treatise of the three most famous national impostors'. Cross reference has also been made to the edition of the Latin text (in Latin and French) by G.Brunet (Paris, 1867) and a seventeenth century manuscript in the British Library Harleian 6494 'de Impostoris Religionum breve Compendium'. For the Latin treatise and its diffusion see V.W.Gericke 'Die Henschunflish uberlieferung dei Buches von den drie Betringen (De Tribus Impostoribus)' (Leipzig, 1986). 5. *DTI* 114,116,118.

⁸ *DTI* 114,116,118

⁹ *DTI* 133.

hermeneutics to avoid circularity has to admit 'other religions'. This severity of criticism was only posed, not elaborated: as the author wrote, 'it would be too long and tedious to show more at length in this place, the nature and forms of what goes under the name of imposture'.¹⁰ This more detailed account of religion and revelation in terms of its 'origins' in human psychology and history is precisely what the French *Traité* set out to accomplish. If the thrust of the Latin work was epistemological: that it is impossible to identify true religion in only one of the three economies, the theme of the French work is anchored in an historical context.

The *Traité* focuses on the origins of religion as a social and political phenomenon: the theory of religion is essentially a theory of imposture. The author posits a model of human anthropology that although originally pure - an ideal community ruled by right reason and natural law - was inherently prone to epistemological corruption. This latency was exposed by scheming impostors, again both priests and monarchs were complicit. So far the *Traité* was probably similar in argument to orthodox accounts of Pagan religion. The implication of the treatise was that this model of religious corruption was not specific to heathenism but was universal to all religious institutions. All humans, unless following the pattern of right reason or common-sense, are prone to ignorance, prejudice and fear, the trinity of ingredients for imposture. This is the work's radicalism: that the theory of priestcraft and the 'empire of falsehood' applies not only to the Pagans, but also to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹¹ If Pagan religion was forged by ecclesiastics and princes to advance their own interests then so too were Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologies. Unlike the Latin treatise which had simply asserted the 'history' of imposture, the French text went to some effort to detail the historical rise of the three great economies and their concomitant prejudices.

Moses, Christ and Mahomet all learned their 'juggling' in Egypt. In turn, having analysed the needs of circumstance and the ignorance of the people, they then calculated politic ideologies to legitimate their empire. The language was deliberately Machiavellian. The tradition of the political legislator, embodied in the histories of Numa Pompilius, Solon and Lycurgus, had been promoted most fervently by the 'atheistical' Florentine Machiavelli in his *Discourses*. Following some of the elliptical suggestions of Machiavelli the French text applied the model to the three religious leaders. So Moses, tutored in the arcana and sciences of the Egyptians, in collaboration with the Heathen Jethro of Midian, achieved a 'revolution'. Jesus, 'who was

¹⁰ *DTI* 124.

¹¹ *TTI* 59.

not unacquainted with the maxims and sciences of the Egyptians' adopted a new theology to renovate the 'faults of the Mosaic policy' by manipulating contemporary messianic expectation. Mahomet, educated in the East, gained credit amongst the Pagans, Jews and Arians, established his empire by a prudent combination of the sword and popular interests accommodated his law to the 'genius and passions of his followers'.¹² Integrated with these histories, which were all accounts - it must be noted - drawn from hostile sources just as the Latin text recommended, the *Traité* displayed a history of ignorance exemplified in an essay on the 'absurd imagination' of theological belief.¹³ The discussions about the variety of ideas about the Soul, about Hell or Heaven, are in effect (to speak anachronistically) analyses of false consciousness. Philosophy, particularly Aristotelianism, was the corrupter of reason and religion, indicted as harbinger of such false ideas as demons, spirits and devils.¹⁴

The *Traité* is not however just a theoretical arraignment of false religion. It is also a practical indictment of 'the injustice of the Doctors in Tiaras, Mitres and Gowns'. In arguing that religion is made by man, rather than the reverse, the work suggests that a critique of error logically leads to a critique of power. An assault on *de jure divino* theories of religion undermined the sanctity of civil sovereignty because they both shared and cultivated a false respect for power and authority.¹⁵ The Latin treatise seems to be concerned with the individual need for epistemological certainty and only by default anticlerical. The *Traité* on the other hand, proposes a profound rejection of organised religion - and as such has been characterised as a seminal moment in the rise of modernity. It argues not only for a theoretical analysis of religion as an anthropomorphic and historical phenomenon, but also crucially was a practical invocation to reform corrupt religion. This practical dimension is commonly ignored, but advancing remedies for corruption is central to the text: 'it is not sufficient to have discovered the disease if we do not apply a remedy'. Indeed as the author

¹²TTI 65-67,72,77,90,91-92. Machiavelli gives his fullest account of political legislators in *The Discourses* (Penguin edition, 1981) Book I chapters 11-15; see also Machiavelli *The Prince* (Penguin edition, 1975) 50-52 where he discussed Moses in the same breath as other Legislators like Cyrus and Romulus. Interestingly the figure of Jethro of Midian was used to justify the politic divinity of the Hebraic commonwealth by James Harrington in his *Oceana* (1656): see *Oceana* (ed) S.J.Liljegren *Skrifter Vetenskaps-Societen* 4 (Lund, 1924) 28,35; see also Harrington *The Art of Lawgiving* in *The Political Works of James Harrington* (ed) J.G.A.Pocock (Cambridge, 1977) 619,652. Jethro and his son Hobab also appear in Toland's *Hodegus* (1720) 51-2. One of the only published accounts of the idea of civil religion in Harrington's writings is M.A.Goldie 'The Civil Religion of James Harrington' in A.Pagden (ed) *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987). For the background to the republican use of the Old Testament see A.Pacchi 'Leviathan and Spinoza's *Tractatus* on revelation: some elements for a comparison' *History of European Ideas* 10 (1989).

¹³ BL Stowe 47 folio 68.

¹⁴ TTI 101 and following.

¹⁵ TTI 105, 54, 58; DTI 116, 118.

continues to argue 'it would be better to leave the sick man in ignorance'.¹⁶ The *Traité* can on the one hand be read as a profoundly pessimistic text: the theme of the inherent ignorance of the majority of the people is constantly reiterated. Against ignorance, prejudice, and most importantly imagination, is opposed reason, nature and 'commonsense'. As reason corrupted engineered religion and superstition, so on the other hand, reason reformed holds forth the possibility of true felicity.

The author of the treatise suggests a Ciceronian origin to human society: men originally lived in rational harmony conforming to the laws of nature and 'the dictates of right reason'. An additional note to one English translation of the *Traité* in the British Library emphasises this cult of reason in the form of the marginal couplet 'True happiness alone in reason lies, tis reason makes, and reason that keeps, us wise'.¹⁷ So it is clear that while the treatise offers a critique of human ignorance it also signposts the means of liberation from the 'absurd imagination' by the use of reason.¹⁸ It is at this conceptual point - where reason is proposed as a model of true religion - that careful thought needs to be paid to the practical purposes of the *Traité*, and the implications this 'practicality' has for the theory of imposture defined in the work. Here it must be stressed that the ideas proposed in this piece are drawn from an 'English' reading of the text contained in the two surviving translations in London and Cincinnati. In this way I wish to draw out ambiguities in the work over the distinction between a 'legislator' and an 'impostor'. This distinction, I argue, becomes more apparent when the *Traité* is read within the context of radical republican attacks on the Anglican Church in England, rather than within the continental culture of the *libertin erudits*.

Let me clarify the position: I have proposed a reading of the treatise that proffers two theories of the 'origins' of religion. The first is found in a psychology of ignorance and the second in a history of imposture displayed in the lives of Moses, Christ and Mohammed. In this way all religion is categorised as superstition. Jewish, Christian and Islamic theology is not a divine but a human artefact. However it is important to ask whether this attack on 'religion' and human nature is an assault on the phenomena in themselves or in their manipulated forms. Is the author against 'Religion' or the sociological manifestations of corrupt religion? The popular account of the history of religion from Pagan to modern times is premised upon the opposition between 'reason' and 'ignorance'. With this opposition the author creates an admixture of psychological (fear) and epistemological (ignorance) explanations to argue for

¹⁶ *TTI* 93.

¹⁷ *TTI* 56, 57; Stowe 47 folio 14.

¹⁸ Stowe 47 folio 68.

the anthropological origins of religion. This was a model of how humans act in societies and history. In describing the origins of religion the author also implicitly advocates a model for how religion ought to function. This ambiguity is illustrated in the imprecision and overlap between the ideas of a 'legislator' and an 'impostor' in the text.

The primary reading of the *Traité* (and one which I speculate gains most takers in the context of French Libertinism) is that all religions are false, all religious leaders speculators, and all priesthoods corrupt. The second, and perhaps more radical and specifically English, reading suggests that since all religion is a social, political and ultimately historical phenomenon with an inherent tendency to imposture, then it is necessary for the wise and rational (the proponents of right reason) to reform religion to 'the gentle yoke of reason and nature'. This second embedded reading (which I will argue is embodied in the neo-Harringtonian tradition of civil theology) suggests that while religious leaders have ordinarily been impostors, they can become 'true legislators'. This interpretation suggests that while the human condition is prone to error, ignorance and prejudice, all does not have to be this way (thus the diagnostic tone of the work) given 'good' laws and 'good' legislators which could enthrone reason in the fabric of civic virtue. A clue to this 'English' reading can be found in Chapter XIII 'Of those Spirits called Demons'. In discussing the classical origins of ideas about spirits the author describes at §5 how 'the dread which people lay under of these invisible powers might hold them within the bounds of their duty' and cited 'a certain celebrated historian of Antiquity' in support of the analysis. Importantly the historian cited was Polybius, and the lengthy extract placed in the footnotes was from Book VI chapter 56 of the *History* which addressed the problem of Republics not being 'composed completely of wise men'. For Polybius, and presumably the author of the treatise, it was acceptable in this case for a legislator to employ 'those imaginary fears which religion imprints in the mind' to keep the people in awe and to their duty. This text from Polybius (to the word) was popular amongst English freethinkers as a classical source for the theory of civil religion.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Stowe 47 Chapter XIII 55 folio 64 'He means Polybius 'it must be noted (says he) that if we could form a republic which should be composed only of wise men all the fabulous opinions concerning *Gods*, Hell, etc would be wholly useless or superfluous. But, since there are no states where the people are other than just such as those we can see, subject to all kinds of irregularities and wickedness, there is a necessity in order to keep them in awe, of having recourse to those imaginary fears which religion imprints in the mind, and those panic terrors of the *other world* which the ancients have so prudently established for that very intent and purpose'. See also my 'Ancient Constitution of the Christian Church: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1730' PhD., (Cambridge University, 1989) 186 on Republican uses of Polybius. The latter's *Histories* were published in England in 1634 and 1698. For background see R.Tuck *Philosophy and Government* (Cambridge, 1993).

That an English reading of the treatise suggests that the impostor/legislator categories were, in function, oppositional rather than inclusive can be given extra support from further textual variants in the surviving English translation in the British Library. This copy omits the chapter on Mohammed: the copyist noted in justification 'as this *writer* consulted none but bad *authors* (seemingly only the lying Greeks) for he has given us in his Xth Chapter relating to Mohammed, and has inserted diverse false facts, I chuse to leave it out being not worth transcribing: we having already many far better and withal genuine accounts of this celebrated Arabic Legislator'. Mohammed is no longer one of a trinity of impostors but a 'celebrated Arabian Legislator'.²⁰ The many 'far better and withal genuine accounts' of Mohammed, as I will explain below, could have included Boulainvilliers' *Life of Mahomet* (1731) but also the earlier English manuscript work written by Henry Stubbe *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahomet* (c1671). The rest of this piece will be concerned with the positive role of the legislator in English freethought and how this links with the traditions of both the Latin and the French treatises on imposture.

II

At the start of this essay I suggested that there was an historical conundrum: that it seemed odd that so few English manuscripts of the *Traité* were in existence, especially given the obvious fear of such a text between the 1650s and 1660s. I now wish to advance some historical and intellectual reasons for this lack of manuscripts, focused upon the opposition between the idea of the 'impostor' and the 'legislator' discussed above. I wish to suggest that at least by the early 1670s there existed in England a radical tradition that discussed the issues contained in the Latin and French texts, that proposed an account of the human origins of religion very similar to these works, but that described the history of the three great religious foundations in terms of legislators rather than impostors. In this way drawing from the religious traditions of radical Protestantism, English radicalism or freethought, in its development of a civil theology, sought not to destroy all religion but to reform it. In doing this, one of the first tools of reform the radicals adopted was that of sacred or scriptural interpretation. Given the limits of space I wish to focus upon one specific theme (although it is not a small one): that of the historical connection between Judaism, Islam and Christianity. As I have shown the French work negated the spiritual quality of this history of religious

²⁰ Stowe 47 folio 54.

transformation, but the English tradition from Henry Stubbe to John Toland re-wrote the narrative as a history of reforming legislators.²¹

Henry Stubbe (1631-1676), was as Anthony à Wood wrote, 'the most noted person of his age'. Recently James Jacob in his excellent study has disinterred the meaning and influence of Stubbe's polemics against the Royal Society in the 1660s and pointed to the links between Stubbe's materialist conception of history and Toland's later writings. I should like to reinforce and extend his suggestions. That Stubbe was a political and religious radical there is no doubt. An intimate of Hobbes, he was renowned for his learning. As under-librarian to Thomas Barlow at the Bodleian he became 'thoroughly read in all political matters, councils, ecclesiastical and prophane histories'. Indeed as Wood commented 'he was a very bold man, uttered anything that came into his mind, not only among his companions, but in public coffee houses, of which he was a great frequenter'. Sir Henry Vane, Republican and regicide, had sponsored him at Westminster and Christchurch. The Independent John Owen gained him preferment to the Bodleian in 1657. In the 1660s Stubbe was part of the Conway coterie at Ragley Hall that later included men like the radical Quaker George Keith. John Beale, friend of Oldenburg, was convinced Stubbe was involved with an atheistic sect in the 1660s. Similarly Daniel Cox had written of his suspicions to Robert Boyle. Oldenburg had described Stubbe as 'a loose unsettled spirit, tending rather to libertinisme and prophanesse, yn to any serious and conscientious enquiry of truth' for his 1659 pamphlet *Light out of Darkness*. Years after Stubbe's death, Beale linked his name with religious unorthodoxy when he railed against 'Hobbians and Stubbians, atheists, scoffers, blasphemers' in the same breath. If any of these men had ever seen Stubbe's manuscript 'Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism' their worst fears would have been assured. The work was composed in about 1671. The editor in 1911 suggested that Stubbe wrote the piece between 1671 and 1674, and Jacob has tied the work accurately to 1671 citing references from Stubbe himself and his clerical antagonist Joseph Glanvill. The earliest dated copy is 1705, and there were at least seven versions in circulation, although some of these were only fragments. It seems likely

²¹ This is the general thesis of my *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies 1660-1720* (Cambridge, 1992) but see also H.T.Roper *Religion. The Reformation. and Social Change* (1967) 193-237; J.G.A.Pocock 'Post Puritan England and the Problem of Enlightenment' in P.Zagorin (ed) *Culture and Politics from Puritanism to the Enlightenment* (1980); K.Scholder *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology* (1990) 26-46. See also M.A.Goldie 'Ideology' in T.Ball, J.Farr, L.Hanson (eds) *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (Cambridge, 1989).

that there were more copies in circulation between the 1670s and the 1700s because both Charles Blount and John Finch may have had access to the written text.²²

The manuscript itself is more than its title suggests: while there is a very detailed, and, for the seventeenth century, a unique historical account of the rise of Islam, there is also an important and original account of the political and human origins of Christianity. To have written on the rise of Mahomet at the time was not unique: the 1650s had occasioned a flurry of anti-Muslim texts. Alexander Ross had Englished du Ryer's inaccurate French translation of the Koran in 1650. Francis Osborne wrote an explicitly Machiavellian work *Political Reflections upon the Government of the Turks* (1656), and more recently Sir Paul Rycaut had published his *Present State of the Ottoman Empire* (1668), all of which may have provided Stubbe with useful material.²³

Stubbe's text was, however, original. He made his points clearly and unambiguously: the lives of Christ and Mohammed were political phenomena. To these 'revolutions' there were 'antecedent causes'. He insisted that 'never did any Republic dwindle into Monarchy, nor any Kingdom alter into an Aristocracy or Commonwealth without a series of preceding causes principally contributing to such alterations'. Christianity was 'conformable to the constant course of human affairs in such great revolutions'. Here Stubbe indicated his radicalism by explicitly denying any providential account of the origins of Christianity: there were no 'miraculous accidents, unimaginable effusions of the Holy Ghost, and such like'. According to this theory Stubbe recounted how Christ perceived the circumstances of Jewish oppression and the general expectation of a Messiah and thus projected himself within the tradition of Jewish Messianism. Christianity was for Stubbe a combination of reformed Judaism and therefore historically conditioned by the practises, law, and monotheism of Moses' religion, and the gentiles who acknowledged Christ as a temporal Messiah but were only bound by the laws of Noah. As Stubbe insisted these first Christians were known as Ebionites or more

²² Oldenburg to Hartlib August 1659 *Oldenburg Correspondence* I 303-304; J.R.Jacob *Henry Stubbe, Radical Protestantism and the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1983) Chapter 8 'Civil Religion and Radical Politics: Stubbe to Toland' passim but especially 65, 76; M.Nicolson (ed) *The Conway Letters: The Correspondence of Anne Viscountess Conway, Henry More and Their Friends* (New Haven, 1930) 327,328,331; H.M.K.Shairani (ed) *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometanism by Dr Henry Stubbe* MA first published in 1911 and republished 1954, 'Introduction' iv-viii. See also L.Kontler 'The Idea of Toleration and the Image of Islam in early Enlightenment English Thought' in E.H.Balzacs (ed) *Sous le Signe des Lumieres* (Budapest, 1987). See C.Blount *Miscellaneous Works* (1695) 158-163; John Finch BL 23,215 'Letters from Sir John Finch and Dr Thomas Baines to Lord and Lady Conway 1651-1678' folios 77-82.

²³ See Champion *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken* Chapter 4.

accurately Nazarenes. This primitive purity was corrupted by an admixture of pagan philosophy and priestly interest. The Judaic notion of a temporal Messiah became interlarded with metaphysics and the resultant idea of a 'spiritual messiah' became the groundbed for the mystery of the Trinity. Stubbe reiterated the point that the Nazarenes believed no other than 'that Christ was a mere man'. It was the corrupt Council of Nicea 'adapting some passages in the New Testament to the Platonic Philosophy' which provided the philosophical (not theological) groundbed for Trinitarianism. Historically for Stubbe the crucial change came after the destruction of the city and temple of Jerusalem (afterwards called Aelia) by the Emperor Adrian: this made it impolitic for Christians to be identified with Judaism and so they 'pretend only to a spiritual Messiah'. With the abandonment of the true Judaic origins of its religion Christianity embraced Paganism, not only in theology but also ritual 'and undoubtedly not long after that wee find mention of Priests, Temples etc'. Festivals formerly retained for Mercury, Venus, Bacchus and other 'rural deities' now became directed to the 'honour of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints'. The most fatal moment in the history of Christian error was the Emperor Constantine's calling of the Council of Nicea to frame a 'confessional faith'. Contrary to the orthodox Foxian tradition that heralded Constantine as the nursing father of the Church, Stubbe portrayed him as a politician who 'insured his own secular power by advancing the ecclesiastical'. Idolatry and priestcraft was the result. As Stubbe wrote, 'Christianity was then degenerated into such a kind of Paganism as wanted nothing but the ancient sacrifices and professed polytheism, and even as to the latter there wanted not some who made three gods of the Trinity, others made a Goddess of the Virgin Mary, the reverence of the Saints differed little from that of the Pagans to their Heroes and Lesser Gods'.²⁴

Eastern Christianity was split into varying sects: it was Mahomet's skill and political prudence that reformed this corrupt religion. Chapters 3 to 9 of the Account give a rational historical description of how Mahomet established a reasonable monotheism modelled upon the Nazarene system. The radicalism of Stubbe's account becomes evident at this point: he deliberately sets out to rescue Islam from the charge of 'vilest imposture' and instead claims that Mahomet was the 'wisest Legislator that ever was'. Indeed importantly, given the relativism proposed in *De Tribus Impostoribus*, Stubbe reverses the charge: many of Mahomet's supposed impostures are in fact Christian 'inventions'. His radicalism is twofold here: first the suggestion that Islam is a true model of pristine Christianity is profoundly unorthodox, but secondly (and perhaps more importantly) Stubbe uses sources and history in

²⁴ Stubbe *An Account* 2,3,52, 16-17, 18-20, 30-31, 32-33, 37, 50.

a way that is indebted to the central theme of the Latin impostor text. For example Stubbe assesses the 'vain' story of 'Mahomet's Pigeon'. The commonplace Christian fable suggested that Mahomet duped his followers into believing that the Holy Ghost communicated with him in the form of a pigeon: in effect Mahomet had simply trained this bird to eat peas out of his ear. On these grounds, as Stubbe recounted the tale, Muslims 'have ever since preserved a veneration or extraordinary respect for pigeons'. Stubbe insisted that there was no 'evidence' for this claim: even Christians as eminent and as learned as Grotius had been led astray by prejudice Stubbe explained 'he did not therein follow any narration of Mahometans, or Arabian Christians, but of European Christians, and particularly of Scaliger in his notes upon Manilius where this is reported, and this is all that can be said for the story'. Stubbe rather neatly inverted the tradition against Christianity by insisting that it was Athanasius (the anti-hero of the Council of Nicea) that had a pigeon 'on his shoulder by his ear'. Stubbe here seems to be alluding to the passages in the *De Tribus* that insisted it was futile to use hostile sources to condemn an opponent's religion.²⁵

Indeed the suggestion that Stubbe's Account was conceived as an essay premised upon the central theme of the Latin text is worth some consideration. Put in a very simplified way, *De Tribus Impostoribus* argued against the sanctity of any one Holy Scripture over the claims of the others: for example the text insisted 'if we are too severely critical of the words of the Koran, we ought to employ the same severity of criticism against the writings of Moses and others'. Stubbe made exactly the same point as the Latin treatise when he commented 'Mahomet is undoubtedly considered an impostor among us; but why? Not from his own testimony or that of his friends but from that of his enemies'. The *Account* therefore set out to defend Islam from the charge of imposture using scholarly, and more interestingly Islamic sources. It also goes one step further in using hostile sources to indict early Christianity. Stubbe was aware of the unorthodoxy of his texts as he acknowledged in Chapter two, 'the Author's apology for the forgoing account of the Primitive Christians'. He insisted that his sources (mainly Pagan and heretic) were good, true and indisputable: 'if', he continued, 'it be further urged that the relation I make are inconsistent with the Apologies of the Ancient Christians, in which the account given are so very different from mine that they cannot in anyway be reconciled, I answer that those Apologies ought to be look'd upon no otherwise than as rhetorical pleas, and the defences of advocates for their clients'.²⁶

²⁵ Stubbe *An Account* 153-155, 158-159, 132-134.

²⁶ *DTI* 133; Stubbe *An Account* 131, 160, 52-61 at 53.

Stubbe in justification offers some examples of the early Fathers corrupting tales for Christian advantage: Justin Martyr fabricated stories about Simon Magus, Apollinaris and Tertullian made up the fiction of the 'legion Fulminea'. Church histories were 'pious frauds', and Church Councils were 'generally picked out by the parties or Princes to carry on Cabals or condemn some particular opinion'. Thus two of the central rules of faith beyond the Bible (the Fathers and the early Councils) were dismissed as imposture. Stubbe, as befitted an intimate friend of Hobbes, did not stop there but went on to suggest that Scripture itself was suspect. Stubbe addressed the central theme of the Latin text: how could we know which was the true divine text. As Stubbe explained, original Alexandrine Christianity had no other Bible than the Septuagint 'or a version of it, and from thence they received those Books which after ages called Apocryphall'. None of the apostles, apart from Paul, could understand Greek, so 'all the sacred Books of the New Testament...may be justly supposed to be but translations or Counterfeits performed by unknown persons'. The knife was twisted further when Stubbe insisted that even the Pauline texts were corrupt and laid the 'foundation of perpetual schisms and heresies'. Stubbe attempted to undermine Scripture in a very similar way to *De Tribus*: as he wrote, 'I have often reflected upon the exception made by the Christians against the Alcoran, and find them to be no other than might be urged with the same strength against our Bible; and what the Christians say for themselves will fully justify the Alcoran'.²⁷

Importantly Stubbe dealt with one scriptural passage that the Latin treatise had discussed concerning the prophecy of Islam or the 'paraclyte' in John 16.7. For Muslims the 'Comforter' is Mahomet 'the Paraclyte or comforter being one of his names or titles in the Arabian language'. The interpretation of the prophecy in John 16 as signifying Mahomet had troubled orthodox men. Henry Oldenburg (who exchanged letters with Stubbe in 1668) wrote to John Beale, rector in Somerset and profound antagonist of Stubbe, on just this theme. As noted above Oldenburg saw that it was essential to defend the divinity of Scripture. Among the specific things that needed to be established with clarity and certainty was the 'intricate genealogy of our Saviour, and his nativity from an untouched Virgin'. In particular it was necessary to justify the New Testament against the 'Mahometans' as 'genuine, unaltered. and altogether free from additions and diminutions'. One such charge Oldenburg noted was the Islamic reading of John 16.²⁸ While Oldenburg was trying to inspire defences of scripture,

²⁷ Stubbe *An Account* 55, 57-58.

²⁸ Stubbe *An Account* 60. Interestingly Stubbe cites Ahmed Ben Edris on the accusation that 'Paul instructed three Princes in religion, and taught each of them a different Christianity: assuring each of them singly that he was in the truth, and afterwards when Paul was dead, each of them pretended his religion to be the true religion derived from Paul, whence arose great feuds amongst them'. Ahmed Ben Edris seems to be an important source for Stubbe's interpretation of Islam but there are very few

Stubbe purposively repeated Islamic charges of corruption suggesting that 'a certain Christian priest of great note' possessed an uncorrupted copy of the Gospel which contained 'divers texts which did very clearly and perspicuously prophecy concerning Mahomet'. Rather than dismiss this interpretation of John 16, Stubbe insisted on the contrary, that 'the texts above recited seem at least as plainly to point to Mahomet and to be fulfilled in him, as any of those which the Christians pick out for their turn'. It is clear then that Stubbe has adopted a sceptical position very close to that advocated in the *De Tribus*; one of the constant themes of the *Account* is that of laying aside one's prejudices, of treating all religious claims as equal. In discussing received ideas of paradise in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Stubbe insists he cannot distinguish between them, and do think that our Notion of the Torments of the wicked in a lake of fire and brimstone somewhere underground, hath as much folly and absurdity in it as any Fable of the Mahometans'.²⁹

The effect of Stubbe's *Account* is manifold. It can be considered as an assault upon all scriptures or 'corans', as Stubbe preferred to call the revelations of different religions. There is also an embedded scriptural claim about the continuity of Jewish, Christian and Islamic *prisca theologia*. Secondly as a work of history the work disinvests the judaeo christian *saeculum* of its sacredness by annexing the Islamic religion to its course. Religion, for Stubbe, is a mutable superstructure related to the political constitutions of particular historical contexts. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the *Account* proffers a positive model of imposture, or to use Stubbe's words, of the necessity of a rational political legislator. The model of Islam is commended by Stubbe because it is rational and prudent, calculated to counter idolatry, superstition and priestcraft: the counter implication is that Trinitarian Christianity is imposture.³⁰

III

To recap, I have tried to draw some distinctions between the Latin and the French treatises and suggested that there appears to be an historical conundrum in the fact that the English

accounts of his thought. D'Herbelot *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1698) and Maracci *Alcorani textus Universus* (Patavius, 1698) make reference to Edris. Humphrey Prideaux in the bibliography appended to the *True Nature of Imposture* (1697) 166 describes him simply as 'An author that writes in defence of the Mahometan religion against the Christian and the Jews'. See Stubbe *Account* 168-170, 173-174 compare with *DTI* 133.

²⁹ Stubbe *An Account* 174, 178, 179. See also Oldenburg to Beale September 1660 *Oldenburg Correspondence* 384-387 at 385-386.

³⁰ Stubbe *An Account* 104, 153, 154.

context is absent from the furore surrounding the publication of the *Traité* in 1719. In a speculative attempt to understand this problem I have suggested that the differences in political and religious traditions between the *libertinism* of the continent and the English Freethinking Republicans exemplified in Stubbe's account may be illuminating. By tracing the influence of Stubbe's manuscript from the 1670s to the publication of John Toland's *Nazarenus. Jewish Gentile and Mahometan Christianity* in 1718, I hope to argue that the *Traité* was impractical for the reforming programme of the neo-Harringtonian republicans of the early eighteenth century.

Stubbe died in 1676 but his manuscript seems to have been in fairly constant circulation from this period onwards. John Finch, ambassador at Constantinople, brother to Anne Conway of Ragley Hall (to whom Stubbe was physician) used large sections of the *Account* on the origins of eastern Christianity in his lengthy letter to Lord Conway in February 1675. Finch considered his account unorthodox enough to have omitted it from a letter describing the East to his sister at the same time. In 1678 Charles Blount, member of the radical Green Ribbon Club, wrote to Rochester, using the manuscript to give his 'a political human account of the subversion of Judaism [and] foundation of Christianity'. That Blount had accepted and approved of Stubbe's work is clear from the scattered references in his letters and published works, such as his translation of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* (1680) and *The Oracles of Reason* (1693). In the latter, again writing to Rochester in the early 1680s, Blount skilfully summarised the *Account* in a few sentences, when he wrote commenting upon Averroes' idea that the whole world is deceived by religion 'for supposing that there were but three laws, viz that of Moses, that of Christ, and that on Mahomet: either all are false, and so the whole world is deceived; or only two of them, and so the greater part is deceived'. Blount seemed to have read Stubbe's work with the Latin treatise at his elbow: his very next sentence illustrates the practical and political dimension Blount assumed this relativism had when he wrote 'But we must know, as Plato and Aristotle well observe, that a Politician is a physician of minds, and that his aim is rather to make men good than knowing: wherefore, according to the diversities of men, he must render himself agreeable to the diversity of humours, for the attainment of his end'. To reinforce this point Blount cited Averroes' justification of the Political legislator devising fables to 'regulate the people'.³¹ When Blount's work was

³¹ C.Blount *Oracles of Reason* 123-124,125-127. Charles Blount is a much understudied figure, casually dismissed by many historians as a mere plagiarist (see for example H.R.Hutcheson (ed) *Lord Herbert of Cherbury's De Religione Laici* (Yale, 1944) (at 48,71-74), but it seems that his work is central to early English Freethought. He was the first translator of passages from Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologicus Politicus*, but more importantly his understudied translation and polemical edition of Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* (1680) combines many of the subversive texts that were compiled in

originally published (and republished) in the mid 1690s it was into a context made overly sensitive to the model of Islam and its connection or discontinuity with Christianity because of the Unitarian polemics against the Trinity. Bound in with this debate was the issue of imposture.

As I have shown elsewhere, the Unitarian polemicists, drawing from the Interregnum writings of Biddle and his contemporaries, explicitly proposed a theological continuity between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The first public statement was an attempt by certain Unitarians in London to address the Moroccan ambassador in 1682 with a statement of Islamic and Unitarian unity. As the Unitarians became more vocal in the 1690s this manifesto of unity was republished by the Nonjuror Charles Leslie in an obvious attempt to blacken his anti-Trinitarian opponents. In this way positive Stubbian or Blountian statements about Mahomet became intermingled with a theological movement that makes it difficult to assess the intentions of the participants. Were Stubbe and Blount proposing a sincere theological reading of Scripture, or were the Unitarians advocating a politic religion? Stephen Nye, the most articulate of the Unitarians, in a *Letter of Resolution* (1691), gave a reading of Scripture that suggested Islamic monotheism was more 'Christian' than seventeenth century Trinitarian corruption.

It was for this reason that Humphrey Prideaux in the *True Nature of Imposture* (1697) attempted both to destroy the value of Mahomet's religion and defend the certainty of the New Testament. It is likely that Prideaux, with the Unitarian texts to the forefront of his mind, sought also to rebuke Stubbe's *Account*.³² Employing, in particular, the arguments of Johannes Andreas, (a late fifteenth century convert from Islam to Christianity) *De Confusione Sectae Mahometanae*, first published in English in the mid 1650s, Prideaux denounced Mahomet as the model of true imposture. In the appended *A Letter to the Deists* he insisted that 'the Gospel of Christ' was no imposture. Christ and Christianity had none of the 'marks, characters, and properties' of imposture. Importantly Prideaux countered Stubbe's contention that Christ had originally presented himself as a Judaic Messiah: the constant theme was of Christ's 'spiritual kingdom' opposed to the messianic notion of a temporal kingdom prevalent

the *Traité de trois imposteurs* (for example Spinoza 99, Vanini 29,69,82,112,113, Hobbes 13,28,29,32,33,151, Averroes 29,73, Postel 72). A much more detailed study of Blount and his use of *libertin* sources needs to be undertaken: for an introductory survey see Champion *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken*.

³² H.Prideaux *The True Nature of Imposture* (1697) compare with Stubbe's *Account* 173-4. Note that both authors use Edward Pococke's *Specimen Historiae Arabum* (Oxford, 1650) 185-185 as a source.

amongst the Jews.³³ Prideaux's work was a massive polemical success. It reached ten editions by 1722. In England then, certainly by the mid 1690s, there was a public and vociferous debate about the nature of imposture. The Unitarians had implied that Trinitarian Anglicanism was priestly imposture and that Scripture was corrupted. Orthodox men like Charles Leslie, Jonathan Edwards and Prideaux wrote virulent counter attacks defending Christianity and the priesthood. Indeed the texture of these debates was not just a criticism of belief (how this text or that text should be interpreted) but was in essence a criticism of power which focused upon the idea of the priesthood as mediators between man and God. As Prideaux noted, the 'notion of a mediator between God and Man was that which did run through all the religions that ever were in the world'.³⁴ For the orthodox only a priesthood could teach men by revelation: for the freethinkers it was the priests who had corrupted an originally pristine and rational religion. The English debate was thus both propositional and practical and the reform of religion was to be undertaken by sacred criticism.

It was into this context that Stubbe's manuscript *Account* was thrust. 'Mahometan Christian, became a commonplace phrase of abuse in the 1690s and 1700s. John Toland was accused of being one in 1698 for his 'blasphemous denial of the *mysteries* of our religion, and his insufferable virulence against the whole *Christian Priesthood*'.³⁵ In 1718 the Irishman justified these charges by publishing *Nazarenus, or Jewish Gentile and Mahometan Christianity*. Thomas Mangey insisted that this work was linked to Stubbe's and I have shown elsewhere that Toland's work is heavily indebted to the *Account*. But here I want to suggest that as a published text it intends to fulfil a similar function to the treatises upon imposture. To be more specific, I wish to argue that Toland's *Nazarenus* epitomises English republican radicalism, in being profoundly influenced by the writings of Harrington and Spinoza, and projecting his ideas for practical reform by undertaking innovative scriptural interpretation. In his reading of the three religions Toland managed to combine the Harringtonian idea of civil religion with a Spinozistic vision of revelation as anything that introduced men to morality.

Toland, given the sobriquet 'Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus', by one opponent, was originally notorious for his *Christianity Not Mystrious* (1696) which proposed a 'reasonable' vision of

³³ Prideaux *A Letter to a Deist* appended to the *True Nature of Imposture* 14-16.

³⁴ Prideaux *The True Nature of Imposture* 150.

³⁵ BL Add Mss 4295 folio 6 58, 63, and 64. Toland replied rather ironically 'The reason for this odd compliment I am yet to learn, unless it be that I can't drink wine enough to pass for orthodoxy with some doctors: for I am by no means for propagating religion by force, in which respect the doctor is a very good Mahometan, how ill a Christian so ever he may be'. The best published account of Toland's thought is R.Sullivan *John Toland and the Deist Controversy* (Harvard, 1982).

religious belief calculated to undermine the 'mystery' of priestcraft.³⁶ All Christian belief and revelation was to be subject to strict historical analysis. A year later he published *Amyntor or a Life of Milton* which contained Toland's meditations on the historicity of the canon of Scripture. These passages were expanded later to become a full length study of Scripture, the *Catalogue of Books...as Truly or Falsely ascribed to Jesus Christ*. These two works present the two sides of Toland's polemic: *Christianity Not Mysteriorious* is a full frontal attack upon priestcraft and as such the book was burnt in Dublin and later condemned by Convocation in London. Toland judiciously left Ireland in fear of his life. *Amyntor* and the *Catalogue* presents the more devious side of Toland's work. They appear as an impartial scholarly and historical commentary on various apocryphal Christian texts. Toland was a learned Biblical scholar. He had been taught by Frederick Spanheim at Leiden in 1692, although he acknowledged that his opinions were sharply at variance with his teacher. Toland's point however was not mere scholarly erudition, although he was proud to note that scholars with continental reputations like Plassius, Daillé, Grabe and Mill all approved his various opinions about particular texts. His assault was not against particular passages but suggested that all scripture (Jewish and Christian) was suppositious. Following Spinoza he argued that each piece of revelation was composed by men for specific purposes. Just as the pagans forged works to induce men to believe, so did the Jews and Christians. The *Anabaticon of Isaiah* and the Sibylline Oracles were two such examples. No wonder that Thomas Brett insisted that Toland's claims about the uncertainty of the Canon were subversive: he wrote 'so there's an end of all revealed religion, and Christianity itself is all cheat and imposture: and if his books have not been much misunderstood and misrepresented, the Destruction of Christianity seems to have been the main design of all his writings'.³⁷

In a later work, *Hodegus*. written between 1708 and 1710 in Holland, Toland executed a precise piece of Spinozism (and a piece that was integrated into the English manuscript of the *Traité*) in his naturalistic explanation of ,the Pillar of Cloud and Fire, described in Exodus.³⁸ At the same time as Toland composed this work he is known to have been working upon a larger account of the Mosaic republic, extracts of which appeared at *Origines Judicae* and *Adeisdaemon* between 1708 and 1709, published at Amsterdam. The Netherlands at this time was also the place where he started his work upon *Nazarenus*. This was to be an attempt to undermine all Christian apostolic tradition. Toland's work was based upon his discovery at

³⁶ J.Toland *A Collection of Several Pieces* {1726} 2 volumes I liv.

³⁷ Toland *Collection* I 354 and following at 355,383,395-396.

³⁸ Toland's *Hodegus* is the source for the section on Moses and the Pillar of Fire in the English translation of the French treatise: see Stowe 47 folio 38; T.Brett *Tradition Necessary* (1718) iv.

Amsterdam of a 'Gospel of Barnabas' in 1709. He had continued his researches at the 'public library' at Leiden although he actually lived in the 'delicious gardens of Honslaerdyck'.³⁹ It has been suggested speculatively that the Gospel may have belonged to either Limborch or Furley: Toland refers to a person of great authority.⁴⁰ Using this text Toland restated with much more scholarly prowess Stubbe's speculations about the Nazarene origins of Islam: where Stubbe had written rather vaguely of the Septuagint or the Gospel of Hebrews, Toland proposed the Gospel of Barnabas as the repository of pristine Christianity and Islam. Like Stubbe, Toland insisted he was 'only a historian, resolved to make no reflection but what my facts will naturally suggest, which are generally collected from the Bible and the Fathers'. The irony can hardly have been unintended. In *Nazarenus* Toland proposed simply and innovatively that all three great religions were part of the same tradition: the religious laws of Moses, Christ and Mahomet were diverse historical and political manifestations of a common rational and prudential religion, 'no less national and political, than religious and sacred'. Toland reduced issues of belief to 'reason and evidence' as opposed to 'revelation and mystery'. Toland argued that the Gospel of Barnabas, an anti-Pauline polemic that denied Christ's resurrection, was a central Christian text. The critics howled: Toland was the 'great advocate of Mahomet' or 'Mahomet's solicitor general'. The Gospel of Barnabas was a forgery and primitive Christianity definitely not Nazarene. Brett rejected Toland's attempt 'to make his new found Mahometan Gospel pass for genuine Scripture' because this was like trying to make 'the Alcoran pass for a Christian book, or, in a word, make anything that an impostor or whimsical enthusiast shall teach, pass for a good saving Christian Doctrine'. Mangey indicted Toland's 'sham discovery [that] gave him an opportunity of emptying his commonplace book, and lent him a title to his long projected Design of unsettling the Canon of Scripture, overturning the foundations of Christianity, and of pursuing that fashionable and threadbare subject of abusing the clergy'.⁴¹

³⁹ J. Toland *Nazarenus* (1718) 111. Some brief notes on Toland's education in Leiden can be found in the holdings of the Dousa Room at Leiden University: the *Volumen Inscriptiorum Sive Catalogus Studiosorum Academiae Leydensis* has Toland's matriculation details for his study under Spanheim. The entry 254 for 1692 reads '1 Nov Joh. Tholandus; Hybernus 1. Theol. Stud. annor 22'. Toland appears to have been resident in the house of Susanna Dolphin in the Langebrugge just off the Rappenburg convenient for the university library.

⁴⁰ See J. Slomp *Psuedo Barnabas in the Context of Moslem-Christian Apologetics* (Pakistan, 1974) 111; L. Cirillo *L'Evangile de Barnabe. Recherches sur la composition et l'origin* (Paris, 1977) 50.

⁴¹ Toland *Nazarenus* 17, 18, 5, 38; *Collection* I xviii, xx; *Tetradymus* (1722) xix; T. Mangey *Remarks Upon Nazarenus* (1722) 3; T. Brett *Tradition Necessary to Explain and Interpret the Holy Scripture* xxi.

What was *Nazarenus* intended to do and how can it be linked to the treatises upon imposture? Contemporaries perceived its prime intention as a burlesque upon Scripture. In undermining the sacred text Toland aimed to overthrow the 'English High Church Pharisees' and their monopoly of interpretation. *Nazarenus* does not however argue for the abolition of all religion but its reform to virtuous fundamentals. Very much like the *Traité*, Toland (citing Cicero) argued that 'right reason' was the bond of society 'where there is or where there is not a reveal'd religion'. The point of a national religion was to induce men to 'right reason'.⁴² Here it is instructive to consider the categories of private and public in Toland's thought: in *Clidopherous* he had drawn the Varroistic distinction between an esoteric or private philosophy and an exoteric or public version of the private adapted to the capacities of popular reason. He commented 'what I whisper'd in private, and what I printed to the world would all speak the same language, all tend to the same end'. To this end Toland explicitly espoused the Harringtonian idea of civil religion: since man was 'by nature' sociable, but prone to error, it was necessary 'therefore that Virtue, Religion, and Understanding ought to provide against these evils of society, by good education and wholesome law'. To this end the 'rules for virtue and religion' were part of a civil philosophy: 'the clergy should teach those rules, and deliver those precepts without adding, diminishing, glossing, or commenting: which is the ready way to make humanity shine, justice flourish, and communities happy'. Toland lamented in 1714 that the Church of England 'is not what we could wish it': it was necessary to 'endeavour to alter and amend by degrees, as far as is practicable'. *Nazarenus* was part of this campaign of practical reform.⁴³

The connections between *Nazarenus* and the French treatise are complex. Margaret Jacob's research has argued that Toland was part of the Masonic coterie that was most likely responsible for the publication of the *Traité* in 1719. Certainly parallels between the main themes on the origins of religion (both historical and human) can be found in Toland's works. However the Bible criticism of *Nazarenus* seems to stand apart from the apparent rejection of all scripture and religion as imposture in the French treatise. Although there is a common appreciation of 'right reason' and 'natural law', the *Traité* consistently seems to adopt a more pessimistic tone than Toland. The impostor theory is presented as a diagnosis not a remedy. This is not to argue that the *Traité* is more radical than the English theorists, but that they are addressing different audiences. This distinction is between a purely propositional analysis and a practical programme. While the *Traité* anatomises priestcraft and imposture it does not give

⁴² Toland *Nazarenus* 82, 65-66.

⁴³ Toland *Collection* II 222,246,247.

any explicit indications of how society can overcome these historical and epistemological problems. On the other hand, the English Republican tradition, indebted to the Harringtonian analysis of authority and civil religion combined with a Hobbist or Spinozist critique of revelation, set out to reform imposture. Thus Toland's *Nazarenus* was conceived as a contribution to the Bangorian Controversy provoked by Bishop Benjamin Hoadly. Writing upon the favourite Hobbist theme of 'My Kingdom is not of this World' Hoadly suggested that the clerical order should be reformed along the lines of a civil religion. Toland set out to promote the same cause. In private Toland was as sceptical as the *Traité* about the capacity of the vulgar to conceive of the pantheistic truth, but he saw the need to reform public religion as a tool for social comfort.

Speculating about the different contexts and intentions of French and English Freethought could fill many more volumes: here having examined the positions, arguments and histories contained in *De Tribus Impostoribus*, the *Traité*, Stubbe's *Account* and Toland's *Nazarenus* I should like to propose a few preliminary remarks. The differences of textual intention lie, I suspect, in the experience of the Interregnum in England: the eruption of radical ideas in both politics and religion in the 1650s provided a storehouse of statements hostile to *de jure divino* defences of Church and State. Attacks upon priests, kings and the Bible were conceived of as a common and linked programme. The revolutionary writings of Harrington and Winstanley, for example, proposed not only theoretical indictments, but also practical models of reform. This public polemic of the 1640s and 1650s was driven underground, as Hill has discussed, with the restoration of monarchy and episcopacy in the 1660s.⁴⁴ Being driven underground did not mean disappearing: Restoration radicalism, as the cases of Stubbe and Blount indicate, developed different strategies to display their attacks. One of the central methods was to write alternative histories of other religions. Cultural relativism became a means of criticising priestcraft in England. Writers like Stubbe, Blount and Toland pre-empted the arguments of the French treatise when they insisted that public religions were necessarily forms of imposture and had to be analysed as forms of political and social ideologies. According to the English tradition the theory of imposture went hand in hand with the theory of the political legislator. Public religions were almost always theologically false but they could potentially become just instruments for the reform of reason. For the English freethinkers theology if it led to virtue was benign, but if it led to ignorance, prejudice and

⁴⁴ See J.F. McGregor, B. Reay (eds) *Radical Religion in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1984); C. Hill *The Experience of Defeat* (1984); R. Zaller 'The continuity of British Radicalism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries' 6 (1981); for a useful case-study see R.H. Popkin 'Spinoza and Samuel Fisher' *Philosophia* 15 (1985).

error it was priestly imposture. In England, unlike France, the peculiarly Protestant tradition of the Royal Supremacy was adopted by radicals like Stubbe and Toland as an erastian instrument against corrupting priests.

